Social Science – Visitor Use Statistics

Background

The Visitor Use Statistics (VUS) program coordinates the collection of visitor count data for over 370 National Park Service (NPS) sites and produces a wide range of reports from monthly visitation studies to an annual statistical abstract. For each park, the VUS analyzes and distributes statistics about the number of visitors, where they visit and how long they stay. This program is part of the Social Science Branch of the Natural Resource Stewardship and Science Directorate's Environmental Quality Division.

Records of visitor use in national parks date back to 1904 before the National Park Service (NPS) was established. In the first year park visitation was measured, six national parks reported a total of 120,690 visitors. Early data collection was informal and was only intended to meet local park needs, but as the NPS grew so did demand for consistent and reliable visitor use data at the national level. VUS manages the formal modern system for collecting, compiling and reporting visitor use data for 377 of the 401 NPS units. Because use of NPS sites is more than just recreation, counts are recorded for both recreation and non-recreation visitors. Non-recreation visitors include commuters and travelers passing through NPS lands, researchers, and people on business in the parks.

Each NPS site is unique and requires a method of counting visitors that is customized for the site yet consistent with other parks. VUS provides oversight and technical assistance to the park personnel who are responsible for collecting and recording visitor use data. After a park collects visitor information, they transfer their numbers to VUS where calculations are made using the raw data. Park counting procedures and calculations follow established guidelines and are continuously audited to ensure consistency across parks, to maintain the integrity of the data and to ensure that the data and calculations are statistically sound. The results are distributed to a website and are used to support a variety of internal and external analysis efforts related to park visitation.

Visitors at Longfellow's Bathtub, Carlsbad Caverns National Park. NPS photo

More Information

Butch Street
Management Analyst

Phone/E-mail
303-343-2740
butch_street@nps.gov

Natural Resource Stewardship & Science
Social Science Program
Visitor Use Statistics
1201 Oakridge Drive
Fort Collins, CO 80525

https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/

Mountaineer stops to take a look in Denali National Park.
NPS Photo

Brandywine Falls observation area at Cuyahoga Valley National Park
NPS Photo

Public Use Statistics Office Activities

The VUS collects, analyzes and publishes official visitation statistics for the NPS on a monthly basis and produces annual summaries at the end of each calendar year. The primary users of visitation statistics are members of the public – from casual park visitors to business owners that sell recreation goods and services. Visitation data is used by gateway communities to project growth of tourism in their local area and the NPS uses the data to allocate resources (money, people, time) for new projects within parks. Also, traffic counts are used for federal highway program management.

The data are also used as foundation data for analyses by the NPS and other federal, state and local agencies. Visitation count data is used as base data for the Visitor Spending Effects (VSE) model (http://www.nature.nps.gov/socialscience/economics.cfm) – this analysis measures how spending by visitors to parks cycles through local economics. VUS data is also being used to assess how changes in climate may increase or decrease visitation at some parks. For example, evaluating how counts by month have changed with weather over time could inform estimates for how visitation might shift seasonally in some parks with changes in temperature.

Most of the reports published by the VUS program are located on the program website (https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/). For each of the 377 reporting parks the VUS publishes:

- An annual park recreation table and graph that displays the total number of recreation visitors for each year since the park began reporting.
- A monthly public use report that shows the current month and year-to-date visitation.
- A detailed table of overnight visits at specific points in a park.

- Tables showing total visitation for each month and year.
- A table of traffic counts for specific locations in a park (where appropriate). This report includes both visitor and employee traffic.
- A year-to-date report summarizing visitation and comparing it with the year-to-date information from the same month in the previous year.

Other reports can be generated and posted on the website if they are requested by a park.

The VUS also complies and publishes the annual Statistical Abstract for the NPS. This report is an annual summary of the monthly data across all reporting parks. The statistics are combined and displayed in various ways to give a good picture of how visitors used the national park system that year. The current year visitation can be compared with the previous year to illustrate how issues affecting park visitation may have changed over time. A special section of the Abstract forecasts future recreation visits for each park by evaluating the trend line of actual visitation data from the previous five years. The Abstract provides valuable historical record of visitor use and provides NPS staff and partners with a useful tool for effective management and planning.

Accomplishments and Current Projects

- The Visitor Use Statistics website was completely rebuilt in 2013 https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/
- Staff provided data and assistance with a report on the effects of the October 2013 government shutdown http://www.nature.nps.gov/socialscience/docs/Economic2013ShutdownReport_Final_nrss_VSE.pdf
- Staff provided data for the 2012 Visitor Spending Effects (VSE) economic model
- 2013 Statistical Abstract published in April 2014
- A new management analyst was added in April 2014